Piotr Wajda

University of Gdańsk

ORCID 0000-0002-7871-0374

Specters of postcolonialism in HBO's *Folklore*

In 2018, HBO Asia produced the first season of a new horror anthology entitled *Folklore*. Eric Khoo, the prominent Singaporean filmmaker (four of his films were submitted as Singapore's official entry for the American Academy Awards), was the showrunner of the show and the man behind the idea of creating an anthology focused on the South-Eastern Asian myths and beliefs. The initial season consisted of six episodes directed by different film artists. Every episode was produced in a different country, so Indonesian, Japanese, Singaporean, Thai, Malaysian, and South Korean cinematographies are represented in the initial season. Eric Khoo was also one of the filmmakers engaged in the project, among such names as Joko Anwar, Takumi Saitoh, Pen-ek Ratanaruang, and Lee Sang-woo. The directors involved in the anthology represented a broad spectrum of talents, most of which had an impact in shaping recent cinema of their origins.

For instance, Joko Anwar is known for creating and shaping the modern Indonesian genre cinema, especially horror. He is recognized for his *Satan's Slaves* (*Pengabdi Setan*, 2017), which dominated Festival Film Indonesia in 2017. Pen-ek Ratanaruang, who directed the Thai episode, represents – next to Apichatpong Weerasethakul – the new wave of Thai cinema. Last but not least, Lee Sang-woo can be considered Kim Ki-duk's apprentice after working for several years as his assistant. Despite the cultural and linguistic diversity of the series, the project

is consistent and provides an easy way to follow the ideas consequently developed in subsequent episodes. The stories presented are not plot-wise connected, allowing the viewers to consider them separate narratives representing various countries. Moreover, the diversity of the episodes also provides a refreshed look at Asian horror. Each part of the anthology depicts beliefs rooted in Asian folklore, combining local cultures with mystery and fear.

The aim of this paper is to scrutinize the semiotics of the monsters presented in selected episodes of the first season. As it might be conducted from the analysis, the figure of the monster appearing in the Asian series follows trends in the current global horror. It does not simply symbolize an antagonist but also social tensions. Looking at the region's history, folk horror becomes an influential tool in depicting the specter of (post)colonialism observed from the modern perspective. More convoluted construction of the monster figure presented in the series, analyzed in the colonial context, suggests that *Folklore* is not only a foundation for the development of the horror subgenre in the region but also presents a voice in a discussion about modernity and the past of Southeastern Asia.

American independent folk horrors such as *The VVitch: A New-England Folktale* (2015) by Robert Eggers or later *Midsommar* (2019) by Ari Aster proves the popularity of the discussed horror subgenre is on the rise. The increasing significance of folklore as a source of fright and dread in the last decade shows that this trend is global-wide. For instance, the first horror film produced in Finland after years was *Sauna* (2008) by Antti-Jussi Annila. The story, set in the 17th century, refers to the meaning of a hot bathhouse sauna in Finnish culture – it is an ideal place for spiritual cleansing. Also, in British cinematography, the significance of folk horror seems to be rising, as observed in such examples as Ben Wheatley's *Kill List* (2011) or *A Field in England* (2013).

Finally, we cannot forget the numerous recent examples of successful folk horrors from Asian cinema, such as Korean *The Wailing* (*Gokseong*, 2016) by Hong-jin Na. The international success of Na's film impacted the HBO series, which presents Asian folklore in modern contexts, similarly to *The Wailing*. However, this Korean film is not the only example of this trend. Many Indonesian horrors produced in the last decade use universal themes easily understood by the worldwide audience (by referring to film classics) and combined with the local lore. The abovementioned *Satan's Slaves* by Joko Anwar is one of the most successful examples. The satanic horror and ghost story formula revealed the presence of *pocong*, a Javanese ghost, which can be further discovered in the following parts of this article.

According to the above, this paper will also depict and discuss the contribution of the *Folklore* series to the development of global folk horror. In the following subchapters, I will scrutinize the connections between Asian, European, and American folk horror. The short introduction to the history of the subgenre, dated back to the 1960s, will help in underlining how the Asian directors reinvented and modernized the genre, adjusting it simultaneously to the needs of the global and local audience.

Defining folk horror

Drawing a definition of folk horror, we need to start by establishing its specter and origins. Bob Trubshaw notes that "the horror fiction genre routinely draws upon folklore" (Trubshaw, 2010, p. 85), pointing out that horror and folklore were intangibly connected even before the term 'horror' was coined. Surprisingly, the abovementioned quote raises more questions: what is folklore, and how might the filmmakers incorporate it? In his classic research on the mentioned subject, Dan Ben-Amos argues that the term will mean different things according to the field of science represented by scholars. He notes that u while anthropologists regarded folklore as literature, scholars of literature defined it as culture" (Ben-Amos, 1971, p. 4). He further develops his thought by adding that "folklorists themselves resorted to enumerative, intuitive, and operational definitions; yet, while all these certainly contributed to the clarification of the nature of folklore, at the same time, they circumvented the main issue, namely, the isolation of the unifying thread that joins jokes and myths, gestures and legends, costumes and music into a single category of knowledge" (Ben-Amos, 1971, p. 4). On the other hand, it is possible to find common ground despite all the differences and nuances in several definitions. Ben-Amos notes that folklore falls into one of three main categories "a body of knowledge, a mode of thought, or a kind of art." Bob Trubshaw points to the roots of horror in oral stories passed from one generation to another in different cultures through centuries (Trubshaw, 2010, p. 85). It is hard to deny that myths, traditions, beliefs, customs, and habits practiced and cultivated in the past were filled with violent and often disturbing images, easily juxtaposed with modern horror.

Mark Gatiss, in the BBC documentary series *A History of Horror with Mark Gatiss* (2010), together with film historian Jonathan Rigby, identified folk horrors as productions that "shared a common obsession with the British landscape, its folklore, and superstitions" (Das & Jardine, 2010). Therefore, the discussed term is mainly connected to a specific cycle of horror (or horror-like) films that resemble the atmosphere of the late 1960s, for example, in British cinema (Murphy,

2022, p. 139). According to Scovell, we can describe something as folk horror if it uses folklore to create a bizarre and terrifying atmosphere or presents an inavoidable clash between arcane and modernity. Folk horror itself does not indicate any existing beliefs. Instead, it makes a new folklore canon by referring to conscious memory and new sets of symbols (Scovell, 2017, n.p.).

Analyzing the "unholy trinity" films – *Witchfinder General* (1968) by Michael Reeves, *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) by Piers Haggard, and *The Wicker Man* (1973) by Robin Hardy – and having in mind the abovementioned definitions, we can list the main features of early British folk horrors. These are the protagonist's isolation, summoning, and distorted system of beliefs and morality. British folk horror films depicted an idyllic (and usually) rural landscape, conducive to living in harmony with nature. Here, the topography's elements adversely affect its inhabitants' social and moral identity. This image leads us to a direct implication of the roots of British gothic horror novels. "Folk Horror finds much within the initial ideas of Romanticism, especially in its admiration and use of landscape, but it instead forcibly uses its anti-rationalist disregard for Enlightenment thinking in various, extreme ways to show an inherent danger in such self-indulgent abandon," notes Scovell (2017, n.p.). Landscapes depicted in the "unholy trinity" films are not only dramatic and majestic; they also underline the isolation of cult groups shown in the narratives. Seclusion from the outer world is one of the main features of horror as a genre. Scovell notices that

> "[…] isolation in a specific Folk Horror context is even more extreme. The people who inhabit Folk Horror are not in the places of their dwelling because of some particular banishment like that of »Cain's clan« but because of natural enforcement through circumstance, situation and the landscape itself" (Scovell, 2017, n.p.).

A good example can be *The Wicker Man*, which depicts an isolated community living according to the Wiccan-based system of morality.

After its heydays in the 1960s and 1970s, the interest in folk horror progressively disappeared with the dawn of the counterculture age. Though, the advent of the hippie era did not cause the definitive death of folk horror as a subgenre. Recent years brought several examples of films developing ideas depicted before in the "unholy trinity." Here should be mentioned *A Field in England* by Ben Wheatley, or David Bruckner's *Ritual*, which refers to Scandinavian mythology. The last decades were fruitful for developing the genre, and folk horror was no longer limited to the United Kingdom. The globalization of cinema caused the growth of interest in new genre forms.

Since the late 1960s, the discussed phenomenon has spread across different parts of the globe and evolved. Therefore, we can observe in recent examples how the distinguishing characteristics changed to suit the modern audience. Also, folk horror films might accent different subjects according to the cinematography it represents – as in the Asian case analyzed below.

From folklore to Asian (urban) legends

Even though the HBO series *Folklore* brings an association with British folk horrors from the late 1960s and early 1970s, it presents a heavily revisited vision of the genre. Instead of repeating the key elements that played a significant role in the British pioneer films, the Asian creators propose a revived and modernized look at the phenomenon.

Among the famous Japanese horrors which gained global recognition, there should be listed Japanese *The Ring* (*Ring*, 1998) or *Dark Water* (*Honogurai mizu no soko kara*, 2002) both directed by Hideo Nakata. *Whispering Corridor* (*Yeogo goedam*, 1998) by Ki-Hyung Park, or *A Tale of Two Sisters* (*Janghwa, Hongryeon*, 2003) by Jee-woon Kim are examples of successful horror films from South Korea. Most Asian horrors realized at the turn of the century feature close connections between terror and urban settings. For instance, in the first part of *The Ring* series, characters visit a cabin to collect information about the murderous phantom. However, to stop the evil, they need to return to Tokyo. Moving the setting from a rural to an urban environment was a significant change for the genre, especially in the case of Japanese cinema. The 1960s were a fruitful decade for the development of J-horror, with such examples as *Onibaba* (1964) by Kaneto Shindo, *Kwaidan* (1964) by Masaki Kobayashi, or *The Living Skeleton* (*Kyûketsu dokuro-sen*, 1968) by Hiroshi Matsuno. These titles dominated early modern Asian horror and significantly shaped the discussed genre for the next decades.

Instead of repeating the themes initiated in the 1960s, *Folklore* creators develop ideas from classic Asian titles, such as the presence of supernatural, inspired by mythology beings, and merge them with the approaches known from the 1990s Japanese and Korean films. The urban legends, intangibly connected to the city landscape, replaced traditional ghosts, spirits, and other residents of the local folklores. For example, on the Japanese ground, the emergence of urban legends brought a fresh understanding of a 'folklore' term. Ghosts and the spiritual world still occupied an important place in traditional stories; however, the modern narratives were more related to a new understanding of collective and personal morality. In horror films from the end of the 20th century, the emer-

gence of modernity, development, and new technologies were associated with the new, often incomprehensible, treat. The technology itself was blamed for being a vessel of evil. Among the most vivid examples, there should be mentioned a videotape in *The Ring* (*Ringu*) series, or a mobile phone in Japanese *One Missed Call* (*Chakushin ari*, 2003) and Korean *The Phone* (*Pon*, 2002). Combining urban landscape and modern technologies with superstitions, Asian horror from that period recreated urban legends on the screen. The impact of the horror cycle initiated in the 1990s is still visible, for example, in HBO-produced anthology.

The creators of *Folklore* combined significant features that defined two influential waves of Asian (Japanese and Korean) horror. As I mentioned before, *Folklore* brings back spirits and monsters that played a significant role in local horror during the 1960s. Creatures appearing in several episodes represent classic folklore and actual beliefs of the region. On the other hand, traditional monsters are presented in the modern and urban setting, which brings to mind later horrors produced in the 1990s and at the beginning of the 20th century. Therefore each episode is a commentary on socioeconomic changes in Southeast Asia and their influence on the region.

Monsters and (post)colonial discourse about identity in *Folklore*

The conflict of old and new, represented by a constant clash between tradition and modernity, paranormal and rationality, or pre-enlightenment and enlightenment, is one of the most significant elements defining the essence of folk horror as a subgenre. Considering the region's history, the series becomes an influential voice in the discussion about the colonial past and post-colonial reality. Most countries featured in the particular episodes of the series faced a foreign occupation at some point in history. Their cultures were repressed (and therefore endangered) by external sovereigns. The colonization of the Southeast nations was motivated by the duty of "spreading the civilization" by Western colonial powers, which by definition was also equal to a belief that the Western quality world is superior to Asian in many aspects. This unjustified and racist conviction led to the marginalization of indigenous cultures, among many other endangerments and social iniquities, based on a simplistic contrast between good (represented by the colonizers) and worse (represented by local cultures).

Folklore is full of paranormal creatures of origins in local mythologies. Each episode introduces a different monster or phantom directly inspired by Asian culture. It is worth noting that the physical appearances in the film – to some degree – follow the mythological origins of the evil creatures. For instance, in the first season of the anthology, various monsters appear as *Wewe Gombel*, *Pob*,

or *pontianak*, among others, underlining the variety of local beliefs. All episodes include supernatural beings in the opening sequences, suggesting that an unknown creature is responsible for the characters' misfortunes. However, the truth turns out to be more convoluted, as the figure of a monster often stands for victims of inequality and post-colonial influences. In the following analysis of the three selected episodes, I will show that *Folklore* is a significant voice in the post-colonial discourse about repressed identity and related traumas.

The first figure worth analyzing in this context is *Wewe Gombel*, which appears in the Indonesian episode directed and written by Joko Anwar. According to Javanese mythology, it was a vengeful female supernatural being. During her life, the woman was happily married until she became pregnant. Since then, her husband has changed and become increasingly violent. When she realized his unfaithfulness, she killed him in rage. Murdering a cheating man started riots in the village, and as a result, the pregnant woman was banished by locals and forced to leave. Out of grief, she committed suicide. According to traditional beliefs, *Wewe Gombel* is a ghost that captures children to soothe her longing for a family. In some versions of a story, her primary targets are kids neglected by their parents. *Wewe Gombel*, despite her monstrous look, wants to protect children. It is not surprising that in mythology, her attributes are long, hanging breasts (Kidd, 2008, pp. 77–78), under which she can hide stolen kids (van der Kroef, 1955, p. 28). In the Indonesian episode of *Folklore*, *Wewe* preserved her monstrous look. Actions around the vengeful woman are marked by death and suffering, but ultimately, it turns out that her intentions are good, like in the original legends.

Notably, the depiction of folklore beliefs in HBO's production does not stand in opposition to modern society. Instead, as it is underlined in the *Wewe Gombel* part, folklore represents a forgotten part of local culture. At some point in this episode's story, the shamanic character appears in a TV program watched by the protagonist and tries to debunk the mysterious case of kidnapped children[1]. Moreover, his explanations are presented as one of the best courses of action. The shaman reverses the meaning of the legend, deliberately hiding the information about the motherly instincts of the monster. He distorts the newsfeed known to the city's inhabitants, stating that *Wewe Gombel* is responsible for one of the home violence accidents. Also, the shaman says that the kidnapped kids wanted to be abducted.

All in all, it turns out that *Wewe Gombel* does not have evil intentions, even emotionally supporting the mother and her kid, who are running away from

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[1]   The same trope comes back in the Singaporean episode, discussed later in this article.

society. In this case, the shaman presenting a distorted version of a legend symbolizes the people who no longer understand the local culture. *Wewe* is not a monster and does not represent the opposition to modernity. Instead, she is a symbol of a forgotten past. The final scene depicting her reunion with the protagonist-mother and the child might be interpreted as a renewal of the bond between local people and their spiritual roots. The runaway family finds the only moment of comfort in the arms of the – reputed – monster, suddenly understanding the principles of their existence.

Another interesting comment on the shape of post-colonial modernity in Southeast Asia can be found in the episode produced in Thailand. In this episode, the main character is a reporter in financial trouble. He cannot afford to take back his car from the service because he does not have money, and additionally, his mother is in hospital. Suddenly the man gets a quick gig job requiring taking pictures of a crime scene. When the protagonist finishes his work, a ghost manifests to him and tries to scare the man, but the photographer is not afraid. The spirit admits that he killed the American businessman and offers to tell a story about the murder. The photographer agrees on a supernatural interview. The ghost turns out to be a *Pob*, which, according to Thai beliefs, is a "malevolent, amorphous spirit related to a distinct category of misfortunes" (Wattanagun, 2018, p. 79). *Pobs* are described as "voracious and formless, the wicked ravenous spirits as conceived by believers penetrate into living creatures, devour them from within, and cause sudden deaths among healthy humans and animals that display no sign of critical illness prior to their passing" (Wattanagun, 2018, p. 79). In *Folklore*, the spirit resembles an older, half-naked man. Tricked by his harmless look, the dead businessman ignored the supernatural abilities of the creature, and at some point, he wanted to feed it with a sandwich. The figure of a deceased American represents the lack of spirituality in the modern West. The *Pob* could haunt the buisnessman's house only because the man had previously removed the statue of Buddha, rejecting the divine protection. Revealing his story, *Pob* aims to comment on the contrast between the West and the East, using the businessman as an example of globalization.

In this context, recent regional development might be considered a threat to local identity. *Pob* reveals his past at some point – he was a taxi driver killed in a brutal assault. This memory haunts him, so the monster constantly retells his story – he is afraid of being forgotten. *Pob* admits being responsible for attacking the American, who went against the local customs and beliefs. However, the reporter is safe in his presence and even gets rewarded for listening to the story, because *Pob* magically solves his financial problems. Writing about folk horror,

Adam Scovell pointed out on a constant tension between "the old and the new ways". In *Folklore* this statement gains another layer when taking into consideration the post-colonial tropes. American businessman symbolizes a lack of knowledge about local customs, so his Western values and business lifestyle might become a menace to Thai spirituality if transferred into the Eastern ground. The specter of colonization comes back indirectly as globalization and *Pob* – a symbol of forgotten beliefs – fights the new influences by the only known means.

All monsters and spirits appearing in the series are presented as ambiguous beings. They cannot be simply described as the antagonists that manifested their desire to destroy the represented world – as it can be said about the monsters in traditional Western horrors. In *Folklore*, the actions of supernatural beings are motivated by the instinct to avenge a violent death. An interesting example illustrating the monster's motivation appears in the fourth episode, representing Singaporean culture. The creature murdering the construction workers turns out to be a *Pontianak*, a popular figure in the late 1950s in local horror. She resembles a Western vampire and is described as such in the series; however, it should be noted that in the series, the look of *Pontianak* was inspired by regional myths. According to the most spread version of Malay beliefs, *Pontianaks* were spirits of "women who died in childbirth and who, for that reason, are the enemies of men" (Galt, 2021, p. 1). In the series, the creature is a girl who comes back to seek revenge after a group of local men brutally raped her. Later it is unveiled that she could get pregnant due to this violent act. A girl's body was found with a nail hammered into her back, which means that her perpetrators knew local beliefs very well and wanted to make sure that she would not come back as a vengeful ghost. However, the monster wakes up when one of the construction workers removes the nail from her back. The men are hunted down one by one. However, the beast protects her savior, who refused to burn a girl's body in the forest.

This underlines *Pontianak*'s ambiguity, which reflects a non-binary approach to culture once dominated by foreign colonial powers. The construction of this figure stands against a Manichean division of the world, classifying the phenomena simply as good or evil. Creatures presented in the series are endowed with incoherent natures, reflecting the diffusion of the two worlds: Western and local. It is important to emphasize that according to the colonial approach, the dichotomy of the world was transparent. The Western world represented order and progress, while the new world (including Southeast Asia) stood for disorder and chaos. The ambiguity of the monsters characteristic for the regional folklore, now repeated in the HBO production, is equal to the attempt to dismantle the vision dictated by foreign powers, trying to simplify and dominate conquested

lands. According to the new symbolic meaning, the encounter with the monster in the *Folklore* series has a didactic value. The extraterrestrial Other teaches the importance of tradition and local beliefs, juxtaposing the old colonial world with a new menace – globalization.

Conclusion

Most folk horror definitions are based on British horror films from the 1960s and 1970s. David Bordwell once observed that the genres morph because of the filmmakers' tendencies to play with conventions (Bordwell, 2020, p. 333). In his theory about genres' cycles, Bordwell further observed that the time for every genre variation is limited (Bordwell, 2020, p. 336). Then, it must be revived and adjusted to the modern audience, partially by removing the tropes that do not comply with evolving societal rules and the economy.

The construction of *Folklore* presents such a revived approach to the genre rules. Unlike the horror films from the hippie era, folk horror is nowadays an international phenomenon, gaining attention all over the world. Pacific Asian cinematographies are also visible in the global horror landscape, creating polemics with the conventions and searching for own means of expression. *Folklore* does not only refer to the most successful horror stories produced in Asia in the 1990s and 2000s but also actively participates in reshaping the subgenre. Each episode of *Folklore* tells a story about a conflict between old and new ways of living, highlighting the attempts to keep local identity – however, not by the locals, but by the monster.

In *Folklore*, the monstrual character appears as an answer to human actions, so the source of evil is clearly defined and connected to particular events. Avery Gordon points out that "the ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us" (Gordon, 2013, p. 108). Understanding the ghost's figure in a way proposed by the scholar provides the possibility for deciphering a monster as a victim, and its actions as consequences of social injustice. A monster in the Asian anthology is no longer just an unknown force representing the Alien/Other figure, but a character representing the repressed culture forced to move from the spotlight to shadow to survive.

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Abstract

This paper aims to present the Asian take on the folk horror subgenre. The author focuses on the HBO-produced anthology Folklore (2018–), which states the starting point for further analyses. Wajda starts by pointing to difficulties in defining 'folk horror' and its meaning for the development of global cinemas. The author describes and compares different approaches to this term and takes a closer look at relations between horror, its literary beginnings, and folk stories filled with grim and gruesome events. Concerning the above, Wajda observes that folk horror was primarily associated with British cinema in the late 1960s and 1970s, later developing into other countries. Furthermore, the author compares British folk horror with the new themes on the Asian ground presented in Folklore. Wajda points out that the current cycle of folk horror is a global phenomenon successfully adopted by Asian filmmakers.

Key words: horror, folklore, folk horror, Asian folklore, Wewe gombel, Pob, post-colonial

Słowa kluczowe: horror, folklor, folk horror, folklor azjatycki, Wewe gombel, Pob, postkolonializm